

## Second Lieutenant Martin Stuart Willan WWII



Second Lieutenant Martin Stuart Willan was the son of Brigadier Hugh Willan DSO MC and the nephew of Colonel Willan both of whom served in the King's Royal Rifles Corps usually known as the 60<sup>th</sup>. He was born in 1918 at Burley Manor in the New Forest. (His father, Hugh Willan bought Bridges in Teffont from the Church in 1938). He was educated at Eton and at the age of 17½ he entered the Royal Navy.

However after 15 months he was invalided out as a midshipman and decided to take up agriculture where he enrolled at the Wye College of agriculture which is part of Imperial College London.

Here you see a couple of photographs of Wye College.



*Figure 1 Wye College Front*



*Figure 2 Wye College Rear View*

However, on the outbreak of WWII he immediately joined the 60<sup>th</sup> and was posted to the Second Battalion one assumes after completing his young officer's training.

On 20 April 1940, 30 Inf Bde under Brigadier Claude Nicholson (Figure 3) was formed at Tidworth for service in Norway.



*Figure 3 Brigadier Claude Nicholson*

The Brigade consisted of three battalions:

2nd Battalion, The King's Royal Rifle Corps (2KRRC)

1st Battalion, The Rifle Brigade (1RB)

1st Battalion, Queen Victoria's Rifles (1QVR)

2KRRC and 1RB, each 700 strong, were Regular Army motor battalions.

1QVR, 550 strong, was a Territorial Army motor-cycle reconnaissance battalion.

(Figure 4) shows the German Advance into France

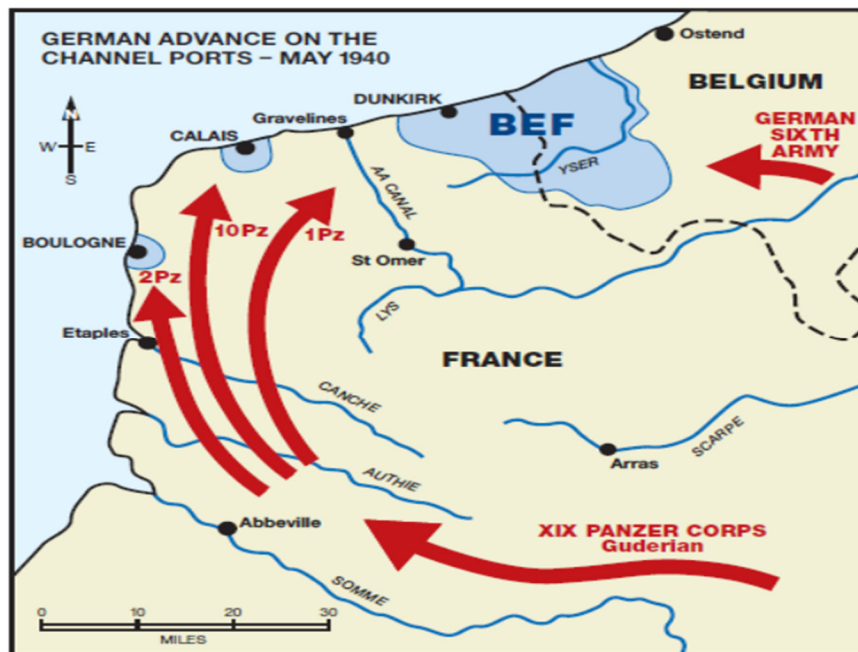


Figure 4 German Advance into France

On 10 May 1940 the Germans launched their Blitzkrieg invasion of the Netherlands, Belgium and France. By 20 May Guderian's XIX Panzer Corps had reached the French coast near Abbeville, threatening to envelop the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) from the south. On 22 May Guderian redirected XIX Panzer Corps north, ordering 1Panzer Division (1PzDiv) to seize Dunkirk, 2PzDiv to seize Boulogne and 10PzDiv to seize Calais (see map, below). By 10 May the plan to despatch 30 Inf Bde to Norway had been aborted. Instead, 2KRRC and 1RB were deployed in East Anglia to counter possible invasion. 1QVR was on similar duty in Kent.

#### British Response – 30 Inf Bde to Calais

Fearing for their lines of communication and that evacuation of the BEF might become necessary, the British decided to establish Boulogne, Calais and Dunkirk as 'base ports'. 20 Guards Brigade was ordered to Boulogne and 30 Inf Bde to Calais. 2KRRC, 1RB and 1QVR received the order to move during the evening of 21 May. 3rd Royal Tank Regiment (3RTR), equipped with cruiser and light tanks, and 229 Anti-Tank Battery RA were ordered to accompany the Brigade. No field artillery or engineer support was included. 3RTR's tanks were already on board a ship in expectation of going to Cherbourg. 1QVR was ordered to move on light scales without transport. 2KRRC and 1RB needed to travel from East Anglia to Southampton and load their vehicles before departure. The troops were not told where they were going until after embarkation.

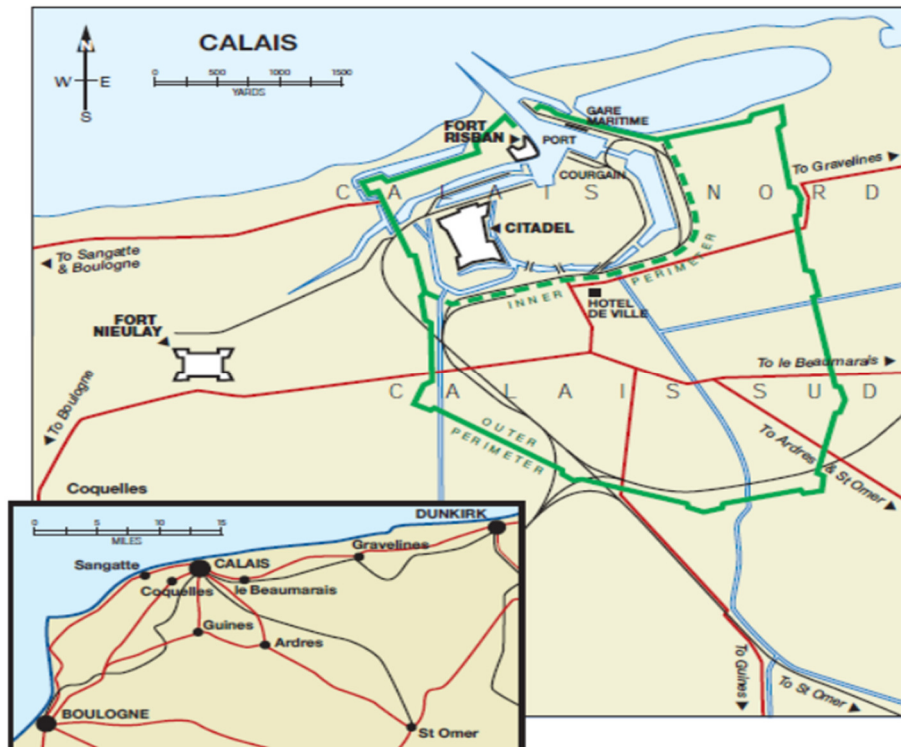
#### Situation in Calais

Calais was in turmoil. It was subject to air attack. Its streets were clogged with refugees, non-combatants and wounded, all seeking passage to England. Rumour and counter-

rumours about the proximity of the Germans were rife. At the same time the British were trying to establish the port as a logistics base and protect it. 1st Searchlight Regiment RA and two anti-aircraft batteries were assigned from the BEF to provide air defence, while a French garrison guarded key points and manned the coastal batteries facing out to sea.

### The Geography

The principal features of Calais, on which its subsequent defence was based, were (Figure 5):



*Figure 5 Calais Map*

The principal features of Calais, on which its subsequent defence was based, were:

- Calais-Nord (Inner Perimeter) – the old town, Citadel, Gare Maritime and docks, linked to the new town by canal bridges.
- Calais-Sud (Outer Perimeter) – the new town to the south of Calais-Nord, with a perimeter, bounded by the old ramparts of Calais, stretching 12 kms.
- Surrounding Countryside – flat, with six main roads converging on the town. Fort Nieulay, an old fort in poor repair, lay a mile to the west of the Inner Perimeter.

## The Sequence of Events

### Wednesday 22 May

3RTR and 1QVR arrived in Calais during the afternoon of 22 May, just after Guderian's XIX Panzer Corps had started advancing north. On arrival, 1QVR was ordered to move on foot into the surrounding countryside and block the main approach roads to Calais. 3RTR began the lengthy process of unloading their tanks and moving to a harbour area near Coquelles. Accurate information about the whereabouts of the Germans was at a premium. Orders were conflicting.

### Thursday 23 May

2KRRC and 1RB, together with Brigadier Nicholson, arrived during the afternoon of 23 May. Meanwhile, 3RTR and the Searchlight Regiment withdrew from positions south of Calais after battling with troops from 1PzDiv. Realising that Calais was likely to be surrounded, Nicholson concentrated his few forces on defence of the town, with 2KRRC manning the Outer Perimeter in the south and west, and 1RB in the east. 1QVR was ordered to provide elements to both battalions as it withdrew from its outposts in the countryside.

### Friday 24 May

At dawn, the leading rifle regiments of 10PzDiv attacked 2KRRC and 1RB's positions. During the day the attacks intensified and the Outer Perimeter was penetrated in the south. After stubbornly defending for 12 hours, Fort Nieulay was overwhelmed. As dusk fell, and in preparation for evacuation at short notice, Nicholson gave the order to close in under cover of darkness and defend the Inner Perimeter. Meanwhile, 30 Guards Brigade was evacuated from Boulogne.

### Saturday 25 May

By 8 a.m. the Germans had occupied Calais-Sud. Intense fighting focused on the canal bridges that gave access to Calais-Nord from the south. These were fiercely defended by 2KRRC. It is very likely that Martin was killed defending these bridges and this photo (Figure 6) shows one of them.



*Figure 6 Calais Bridge*

Soon after 11am Brigadier Nicholson rejected an offer to surrender. Rejection prompted a major bombardment and attack on the British positions. Around 4pm a further offer to surrender was rejected. By now it was clear that there would be no evacuation. Much of Calais-Nord was in flames. The heat and smoke were intense. Houses were in ruins and the streets strewn with rubble. German snipers were everywhere. Casualties were mounting. Water and ammunition were in short supply. Virtually all the Brigade's tanks and anti-tank guns were out of action.

Sunday 26 May

After an overnight lull, the Germans resumed their assault at dawn. At 9.30 a.m. wave upon wave of Stuka dive bombers attacked from the air with high explosive and incendiary bombs, turning what was left of the old town into a raging furnace. By midday the Germans had succeeded in infiltrating the Inner Perimeter. Fierce street-fighting followed. By 3pm the Citadel was surrounded and the Germans were in occupation of the Gare Maritime. Exhausted and with little ammunition, the surviving members of 30 Inf Bde made their last stand. By 4.30pm the Citadel had fallen and all organised resistance ended.

The defence of Calais was by any standards heroic. Against a backdrop of chaos, confusion and uncertainty, outnumbered, outgunned and with their backs against the sea, the British, plus 800 valiant Frenchmen, held a German Panzer Division at bay for 3 days. Hurriedly despatched, lacking all arms support and without hope of evacuation, officers and soldiers alike fought with a tenacity, courage and gallantry, which, ever since, have provided an example to others. Churchill was in no doubt that the Defence of Calais contributed to buying vital additional time for the subsequent successful evacuation of 360,000 Allied troops from Dunkirk. Calais, however, was in ruins and its citizens displaced. Here are some photos which show the devastation of the battle.





*Street barricade near Pont Freycinet.*



Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-1971-042-18  
Foto: o. Ang. 127. Mai 1940

300 British troops were killed and 700 wounded. Only a handful escaped. Over 2,000 faced 5 years in Prisoner of War camps, which some, including Brigadier Nicholson, did not survive. The human cost, borne by so few for the benefit of so many, was high.

Martin Willan deployed on Thursday, 23 May 1940 with the 2<sup>nd</sup> KRRC and by the end of Saturday, 25 May he was dead. Capt Alick Williams wrote of him as follows: At Calais he acquitted himself magnificently and his death was a grievous loss to the battalion. He was a promising young officer, keen and stout-hearted. During this short time with us he threw himself wholeheartedly into his job and proved that he had the energy and character to train and lead men. His father also received a letter from the Principal of Wye College: we are all deeply grieved to learn of Martin's death. He was one of the finest young fellows I ever had the pleasure of meeting. Throughout his period of residence here his character and general fitness were assets to the college and its life. He was greatly respected by staff and students alike. He is buried in the Calais Southern Cemetery



*Figure 7 Calais Southern Cemetery*

and is commemorated at both Eton College and Wye College.





Figure 8 Eton Collage Memorial



Figure 9 Wye College Memorial